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This journal is devoted primarily to disseminating information on early explorations in the west and to the early history of that area.

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A SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND VOYAGE

OF

JUAN RODRIGUEZ CABRILLO

by

Francis R. Holland, Jr.

Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sits upon the pages of history as an enigma. His life can be traced only as far back as 1520 and from there on it is at best sketchy. Even his name raises a question, and his nationality cannot be proved with absolute certainty. That he was Portuguese, however, there is little doubt.

The name Cabrillo (the Spanish form), or Cabrilho (the Portuguese), is unknown in Portugal as a family name. It has been suggested that possibly he came from one of the several towns in Portugal named Cabril and that he used this as a basis for Cabrillo which he attached to his name to distinguish himself from the numerous other Juan Rodriguezes in the New World. That this is true is borne out to some extent by the fact that he signed at least one document simply "Juan Rodz."

Cabrillo first appears upon the pages of history in 1520 when he came with Narvaez from Cuba to arrest Cortes. In 1519 Cortes had been dispatched by the Governor of Cuba to conquer Mexico. With audacity, daring, and the skillful playing of one group against another, he was succeeding in his task. But in so doing he angered the Governor of Cuba. The Governor then gave to Panfilo de Narvaez an army larger than Cortes's, charging him to arrest and return Cortes to Cuba. Narvaez journeyed to Mexico, landed at Veracruz, marched out, met Cortes in battle, and was defeated. A generous and judicious application of promises and gold by Cortes permitted his victory over the numerically superior army. After the battle, most of Narvaez's men, including Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, joined Cortes's army.

Cabrillo was not an important individual at this time; at best he was possibly a corporal of crossbowmen. Later, according to the manuscript of Bernal Diaz del Castillo's history, he assisted in building the ships Cortes used in the conquest of Mexico. But this is a fleeting glimpse, and the only one we have of Cabrillo during this period.

After the defeat and subjugation of the Aztecs, Cortes sent one of his chief lieutenants, Pedro de Alvarado, to Guatemala to conquer that territory. With Alvarado went Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo.

The conquest of Guatemala followed a bloody course, and Cabrillo served valiantly. Afterwards he was given several encomiendas, or estates, as reward for his services.

The period that followed the conquest was one of comparative tranquility for Cabrillo. He returned to Spain where he married Beatriz Sanchez de Ortega,

the sister of a fellow conquistadore. He settled down, had several children, and developed his business interests in Guatemala, which included mining, shipping, and farming.

In the meantime, the restless and ambitious Alvarado was attempting to gather further wealth and glory. During the early 1530's Alvarado heard of the success and wealth Pizarro was garnering in the conquest of Peru and decided that the shortest road to fortune and fame lay in the direction of that country. The results of Alvarado's expedition there were not auspicious, and he turned his ambitions northward.

In 1539 Alvarado received from the Spanish Crown a license to explore the South Sea (Pacific Ocean) with the prime purpose of locating the Spice Islands. To accomplish this purpose, Alvarado had need of Cabrillo, who had a reputation as a "person very skilled in matters of the sea." Alvarado asked Cabrillo to be his second-in-command of the northern expedition with the title of almirante, or admiral. Cabrillo assented and was given the task of raising the fleet necessary for the expedition. At Iztapa in Guatemala Cabrillo gathered together twelve or thirteen vessels. When the fleet was collected Alvarado and Cabrillo sailed north along the coast, eventually arriving at Navidad in Mexico.

At Tiripitio Alvarado went into conference with Antonio de Mendoza, the viceroy of New Spain. The license Alvarado had received from the crown stated that Mendoza was to receive a one-third interest in the expedition. This arrangement, of course, did not especially please Alvarado, but there was little he could do about it. He did hope, however, to receive some recompense for this share. As a result of the conference, Mendoza received a one-half interest in the expedition, but in return, Alvarado received a half interest in several expeditions Mendoza was sending out, the best known one being the famous Coronado expedition.

After the conference, and before he could depart northward, Alvarado was called upon to help suppress a native uprising. This was the well known Mixton War. Alvarado responded with alacrity, went out, met the Indians in battle and was disastrously defeated. During the retreat he was crushed by his secretary's horse which toppled on him in a panicky effort to climb a rocky incline.

With the death of Alvarado the fleet fell into the hands of Mendoza, who soon dispersed it. Several ships were given to Villalobos for use in an expedition to the Philippines. Bollandos probably used several more of the ships for his exploring expedition up the west coast of Baja California. This expedition did not reach as far north as the Cedros Islands.

In 1542 Mendoza gave two ships--the San Salvador and the Victoria-- to Cabrillo and ordered him to explore to the north. Cabrillo's exact instructions are not known. It seems apparent from the evidence that one specific objective was to locate the mythical Straits of Anian. These straits, theoretically, extended from the east coast of the New World to the west coast and were a short cut to Cathay and Cipango (China and Japan). Spain was anxious to find them first.

On June 27, 1542, Cabrillo and his two ships departed Navidad and beat their way up the coast of Mexico, stopping first at Cape Corrientes. They continued northward, then cut across to Baja California at Cape Pulmo. Rounding the tip of Baja California, they sailed up the west coast. Cabrillo paused often along this coast to gather food, water, and wood, look around to see what the land was like, talk to the Indians, and to name several places. He reached the Cedros Islands, spent a few days there, and then proceeded onward. On August 21 the ships arrived at what is now the Bay of San Quentin. Here Cabrillo went ashore and for the first time claimed land for Spain. This act indicates the northern extent of previous Spanish explorations on the west coast, especially that of Ulloa who had journeyed along this shore in 1539. Cabrillo named this place Port Possession and spent a week there.

Proceeding northward slowly, stopping often, the ships on September 27 passed three islands "completely denuded of soil." These islands are just eighteen miles off the tip of Point Loma and are known today as Los Coronados Islands. Cabrillo named them the Desert Islands. The next day, Thursday, he sailed into what is now the bay of San Diego and anchored just outside the harbor. On the following day he sailed into the harbor. Cabrillo named this port San Miguel after St. Michael whose feast day is September 29. The harbor was described as being "closed and very good" since Cabrillo's ships rode out a storm here and "did not feel it at all." This was the first of many storms the expedition encountered on the trip. Cabrillo talked to the Indians in this port and described them as being "comely and large" and going about "covered with skins of animals." At first the Indians weren't too friendly--they wounded three of Cabrillo's men when they went ashore to fish. He captured some boys and gave them presents, and thus he lured other Indians to him.

After six days in this port, Cabrillo departed. He passed two islands, the present islands of Santa Catalina and San Clemente, which he named San Salvador and Victoria in honor of his ships. He stopped at one of the islands, but which one cannot be ascertained. He then sailed over to the coast at what is now San Pedro. He named this place Bahia de Los Fumos (Bay of Smokes) "on account of the many smokes they saw there." These "smokes" were probably Indian fires.

The next day the two ships sailed out of the bay and continued up the coast for six leagues, where they anchored overnight. On October 10 they arrived at Mugu Lagoon. Here, the summary log says, "we saw on the land a pueblo of Indians close to the sea, the houses being large like those of New Spain." A number of Indians came out in canoes to greet them, and Cabrillo named the town Pueblo de Las Canoas. The ships remained here until the following Friday, the 13th, and then moved slowly up the coast until five days later when "they drew near to a headland which forms a cape like a galley, and named it Cape Galera" (Point Conception). Along this coast they had stopped often, and at each place they were visited by local Indians who pointed out to them and named the various towns. Between Mugu Lagoon and Point Conception Cabrillo noted more than three dozen towns, and he described the coast as being "very thickly settled."

The ships then made an effort to round Cape Galera but were unable to do so because of adverse northwest winds; so they came about and discovered the northernmost of the Channel Islands, the present island of San Miguel, which Cabrillo named La Posesion. On going ashore on this island Cabrillo slipped and broke a limb. Eye witnesses to the event said it was his leg; the summary log says that it was his arm. All agreed, however, that the wound was on the right side of his body.

They spent a week here and on October 25 departed. Again they encountered contrary winds and with considerable difficulty slowly beat their way up the coast. By November 1 they were only a few miles north of Cape Galera. On that day heavy winds forced them to turn back and seek shelter under the Cape.

On November 6 they once again started north. The winds were light, and it wasn't until the 10th that they actually rounded the Cape. Shortly thereafter the winds improved, and the two ships skimmed northward with a bone in their teeth. The night of the 11th they encountered a gale which was so severe that "they could not carry a palm of sail, and were forced to scud with a small foresail, with much labor, the whole night." "The storm was as severe as any there could be in Spain," says the summary log. The flagship lost sight of the escort vessel, and "they greatly feared she might be lost." For two days the flagship prowled along the coast anxiously searching for the Victoria. Meanwhile, the San Salvador passed San Francisco Bay, which was not seen, and reached Cabrillo's most northerly point, either the vicinity of Fort Ross or Point Reyes. On the 15th the escort vessel was finally sighted, and the man on the flagship "heartily thanked God, for they had thought her lost." The men of the Victoria were probably even more overjoyed at having survived the storm. They had suffered much, since their ship was smaller than the flagship and had no decking.

After reuniting, the two ships continued down the coast and on November 23 arrived at the island Cabrillo had named Possesion, where Cabrillo decided to spend the winter.

On this island on January 3, 1543, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo died as a result of the limb broken the previous October. Gangrene probably had developed. Cabrillo was a man of duty, and before he died he admonished his chief pilot, Bartolomé Ferrello, to continue the voyage and "to discover as much as possible of all that coast." Although it is not indicated in the summary log, Ferrello and his men probably buried Cabrillo on the island; and, to honor their captain, Ferrello changed the name of it to Isla de Juan Rodriguez.

Sixteen days later Ferrello left the island with the two ships and moved to the mainland to obtain food for the northern voyage. On February 14 they anchored at "San Sebastian Island" (Santa Cruz) "in order to make sail to run out to sea" On the 18th they departed on a long tack to the southwest "because they were told . . . there were some other islands" in that direction. The two ships reportedly traveled 100 leagues to the southwest before coming about to the north. By the 25th they had attained their previous most northerly point and were pushing onward into uncharted waters.

During this whole northern trip the winds were vile. Most of the time the ships headed in a general northerly direction, but on occasion the winds forced them to come about and run to the south. At one point the storm became so severe that the men considered "themselves lost and commended themselves to our Senora de Guadalupe and made their vows." They came out of this crisis in one piece, but a few days later the sea rose so high "that it set them to wildly crying out that if the Lord and His Blessed Mother did not miraculously save them they could not escape." Again they survived, but to find that all they had to eat was "some damaged biscuits."

Before the storms forced them to turn back, the ships had reached the area of southern Oregon. In that latitude, however, they did not sight land; the winds had forced them too far to seaward and had also reduced visibility. They did see birds and fresh logs which had been brought down from the interior by some of the northern rivers, and this evidence indicated to them that land was not far distant.

As they ran down the coast they sought a port to shelter them from the storms. Finding none, Ferrelo decided to return to Juan Rodriguez Island. Here the heavy seas prohibited their entering the port and forced them to find a haven under a neighboring island. As they had neared their wintering place, on the night of March 5, the Victoria once again disappeared. The crew of the San Salvador "suspected that the sea had devoured her."

The winds finally abated, and on March 8 the flagship headed south looking for the Victoria. Ferrelo stopped occasionally at previously visited ports to seek news of her, but the Indians could tell him nothing. The San Salvador returned to the port Cabrillo had named San Miguel (San Diego) and waited six days. But the wait was in vain. On the 17th the flagship once again moved southward. It paused every so often to wait a day or two for the escort vessel, but it didn't appear. The flagship reached the Cedros Islands and waited two days. Finally the Victoria hove into sight. There was much rejoicing among the men, and on April 2 the two ships set sail for Navidad, arriving there April 14, 1543.

The voyage had been long, dangerous, and arduous; one the participants could speak of with pride and boast of to their grandchildren. The ships these men sailed in were small; the larger one probably did not exceed 100 feet from stern to bowsprit. The ships had been constructed in the New World and were not as finished nor as well built as those fashioned in Spain. Only one of them was even partially decked. Anyone who has been to sea cannot help but have empathy with these men as the sea arose and the waves came crashing over the side dousing everything, men, food, and clothing. One suffers with them in their discomfort.

These men sailed into water where no European had been before; they did not know what lay ahead. It must be kept in mind that these men were ordinary humans with ordinary fears. They did not always stand cool in the fray as we tend to think of explorers and adventurers, and they could become frightened. One time while entering the harbor at Juan Rodriguez Island, which had a narrow channel, the ship came near foundering, and the men became so frightened

that they swore to "Our Lady" that if they were permitted to get through safely that on their return to Mexico they would all go to church stark naked. The fact that both ships returned, with the apparent loss of only two lives, indicates that the men were able to conquer some of their fears, enough at least to bring the ships safely through. That the ships returned is a fine tribute to the skill of these peerless mariners who had sailed along the western coast during the season of the year when storms are most prevalent.

It should also be remembered that the navigational equipment used can generously be termed primitive, and due to it Cabrillo and Ferrelo were consistently off from one to two degrees in latitude.

Nothing was done about the new land that Cabrillo had discovered until some sixty years later, in 1602, when Sebastian Vizcaino was sent north to look for possible settlement sites and to try to find the mythical Straits of Anian. Before he left Mexico Vizcaino was given instructions not to change the names of any places given by previous explorers. Since Cabrillo was consistently off in latitude, Vizcaino used this inaccuracy as an excuse and said he was unable to identify the various places Cabrillo discovered. He proceeded to give them his own names. When he reached the fine harbor Cabrillo had named San Miguel, Vizcaino named it San Diego. That name has remained, as have many of Vizcaino's along the West Coast. Unfortunately, practically everyone of Cabrillo's has faded away.

It was Cabrillo, though, who had made known to the European world the existence and character of the western coast of the present United States. As a result of his viage cartographers were able to delineate the coast line of the "northern mystery." Vizcaino's expedition added details to Cabrillo's discoveries, and his voyage is significant in that respect. It wasn't until 226 years after Cabrillo's journey, though, that the next truly important step took place--the settlement of the land Cabrillo had discovered and explored.

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